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Darwin and the Puzzle of Primogeniture: An Essay on Biases in Parental Investment after Birth

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Abstract: A historical survey of the inheritance practices of farming families in North America and elsewhere indicates that resource allocations among children differed through time and space with regard to sex bias and equality. Tensions between provisioning all children and maintaining a productive economic entity (the farm) were resolved in various ways, depending on population pressures, the family's relative resource level, and the number and sex of children.

Against a backdrop of generalized son preference, parents responded to ecological circumstances by investing in offspring differentially within and between the sexes. Vesting the preponderance of family resources in one heir increased the likelihood of at least one line surviving across several generations, whereas varying degrees of parental investment in emigrating sons or out-marrying daughters might yield boom or bust harvests of grandchildren according to circumstances in more remote locales. Primogeniture (eldest son as primary heir) allowed early identification of heirs and appropriate socialization, as well as more time for parents to contribute to the heir's reproductive success. Son bias and unigeniture decreased as numbers of children per family declined, as land became less critical to economic success, and as legal changes improved the resource-holding potential of females. We suggest that changing ecological conditions affected parental decisions regarding resource allocation among children at least as much as did changing ideologies of parent-child relations.

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